

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director (Intelligence)

SUBJECT : Communist China and the "Paper Tiger"

1. Mr. Sulzberger's article in the New York Times on 18 December argues that first-hand experience with their own atomic device last October has sobered the Chinese Communists and caused them to upgrade their assessment of US military might and the nuclear arsenal which forms its core.

2. His view is based on the supposed "fact" that since last October Peiping has stopped referring to the US as a "Paper Tiger" and has demonstrated genuine alarm in its violent protests against the stationing of Polaris submarines in the Far East. This has led unnamed diplomats quoted by Mr. Sulzberger to conclude that the Chinese now have a better appreciation of the horrors of nuclear war and are therefore less willing to accept the risks of a US strike than they were before their own successful test.

3. These people—"diplomats with experience in Communist China"—go on to speculate that because the Chinese leaders are now more "realistic" they will come to take a different view of the Indochina situation and be less inclined to gamble on the possibility that the US is not bluffing and might escalate the war into a nuclear conflict.

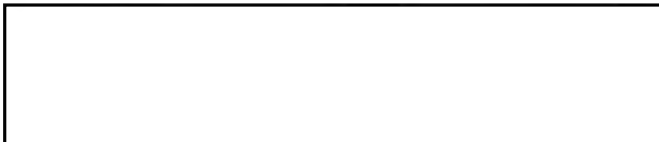
4. It seems doubtful that evaluation of the test has caused any such reappraisal on the part of the Chinese. Given the wide diffusion of nuclear knowledge, the results probably caused little surprise in Peiping—certainly not the kind of shock which would make men like Mao give up ambitious plans in Southeast Asia. There is nothing in Chinese actions since last fall which suggests they are now inclined to tread more carefully.

5. Peiping has always had a healthy respect for US power and in "tactical" situations which held what the Chinese regard as a real possibility of major direct confrontation with the US they have proceeded very cautiously. Where the Chinese have been bold in "despising the US strategically" it appears in the main to reflect an estimate that there was little danger of a blow delivered with the full weight of American strength.

6. The Chinese probably do not regard the potential destructiveness of an atomic attack as cavalierly as their earlier statements have been made to suggest. It seems likely that Peiping's backing of the DRV in the Indochina war has been based not so much on ignorance concerning nuclear weapons as on the calculation that the possibility of their use against China is fairly remote.

7. If Peiping was frightened into considering a new policy by the results of the test at Lop Nor, there has been no clue in Chinese public statements and Mr. Sulzberger's friends are basing their opinions on faulty information. The Chinese have, in fact, never stopped referring to either the US or to nuclear weapons as "Paper Tigers." Examination of the record shows that since the end of November last year NCNA has carried no less than twelve major statements in which this now-classic term has been used.

8. Peiping reacted promptly and predictably on 14 November with an angry complaint about the visit of the US nuclear submarine Sea Dragon to Japanese ports. The announced decision to station Polaris submarines in Asian waters produced an even louder Chinese protest. This government statement, broadcast on 29 December, jeered at the US for trying to intimidate China by "dispatching a few nuclear submarines" and concluded with the standard assertion that the atomic bomb is a "Paper Tiger," that it is "people" who will determine the destiny of mankind, and that the US is "approaching closer and closer to its grave."



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